

Community Colleges: Helping Get People Back to Work

Governor Patrick has proposed to make community colleges a key component of his efforts to help people get back to work by unifying the fifteen individual community college campuses into a strengthened, state-wide system. A unified community college system will work in coordination with vocational schools, career centers, businesses and other public higher education institutions to ensure that residents can get the skills they need for the jobs that are available now - - and also ensure that we provide students with a strong academic foundation so that they have the ability to meet emerging workforce needs as the economy continues to change. Governor Patrick's proposal calls for each campus to maintain local control and day-to-day management and for the state Board of Higher Education to set performance benchmarks to make sure that community colleges are fully integrated with the state's economic and educational systems.

Why this plan? What's the problem we're trying to solve with this proposal?

There are 120,000 job openings in Massachusetts right now and 240,000 people looking for work. The challenge before us is to match the talent of job seekers with the skills needed to fill the open jobs. To do that, we need to create an integrated and unified workforce talent pipeline.

When open positions remain unfilled, it is usually because there is a gap between the skills employers need and the skills job seekers have, especially when it comes to jobs that require more than a high school degree but not necessarily a bachelor's degree. This proposal is about closing that gap and making sure residents can get the training they need to get jobs.

The problem we have is the skills gap; the problem is not the community colleges. The community colleges are at the center of the solution. We need to be able to meet the needs that exist today – and have the vision and flexibility to be ready as those needs change with our growing economy.

How does this plan help solve the skills gap?

This plan builds on the successful programs many community colleges currently offer. It takes the success they have had with some of their local businesses and gives all community colleges the tools they need to replicate that with more employers, especially those with more complex jobs. Our current system of community college organization produces those types of interactions at the local level, but provides no vehicle for parallel collaboration at the regional and state levels.

Under this plan, students will be able to tap into resources, employers and programs across Massachusetts. Employers will know that they can grow in Massachusetts and can count on a well-trained workforce in every region of the state.

Governor Patrick's proposal helps community colleges close the skills gap by increasing state funding, calling on businesses to raise private funds and allowing more state and federal workforce training funds to go directly to community colleges. Integrating this increased funding with greater accountability and efficiencies will help ease the burden on students and keep community colleges accessible to the people who need them.

Does this program take away local control?

No, this proposal **preserves** local Boards of Trustees to manage the day to day operation of each campus and to develop campus specific strategic plans based on their assessment of local needs.

This plan does establish a “shared governance model,” consolidating some power with the state-wide Board of Higher Education while explicitly preserving local control as outlined above.

The Board of Higher Education will be responsible for allocating funding and holding local campus leadership accountable. To do this, the Board will use clear and public criteria including student enrollment, responsiveness to the changing workforce needs and other performance measures, such as how a given campus is working to meet Vision Project benchmarks and how easy is it for students to transfer to other community colleges, to a state college or to the University of Massachusetts. Campuses won’t be “told what to do” by the board; they will be held accountable for how well they are helping close the skills gap in their region.

Even with these changes the Massachusetts community colleges would still be among the most autonomous state-supported community colleges in the country.

What are the benefits to students?

Students will have more access to relevant, career-focused training programs and high-quality educational opportunities, which will make it easier for them to find a job or move on to a four-year college.

In a unified system, students will have access to world-class skills training at every community college. It will be easier for students to find and access the right program for them, even if it is not at their local campus.

A statewide system will make it easier to transfer credits between different community college campuses as well as state colleges and universities and the UMass system.

Does this proposal mean community college students can’t move on to four-year institutions?

No. This proposal will make it easier for students to go from community college to another community college or a public four-year institution by standardizing core classes and credits.

Why not just increase funding for the current system?

The economy is growing and changing; our community colleges – and all of our economic and educational systems in Massachusetts – must adapt and work together to keep pace.

We must build a comprehensive system that has the capacity to meet constantly evolving workforce needs. With community colleges at the center, the system will include vocational and technical schools, our workforce training system, employers and the public higher education system. No one part can do it on its own.

The jobs available today require more complex skills and training than ever before and Massachusetts companies can recruit talent from around the world. Residents need a strong community college system so that they can compete for those jobs.

Our community college students deserve the chance to attend world-class programs and our community colleges need additional support to build them. We can’t ask fifteen small campuses to each compete against the entire state of North Carolina or California. In order to compete on a national level, we need to unify the efforts of our community colleges and make them part of our comprehensive efforts to help people get back to work.